Ratings & Reviews *for*

Obsolescence

Martha Wells

3.65
239 ratings31 reviews
5 stars
47 (19%)
4 stars
95 (39%)
3 stars
73 (30%)
2 stars
15 (6%)
1 star
9 (3%)
Search review text

Marlene
3,361 reviews241 followers
August 19, 2025
Martha Wells is the Guest of Honor at this year’s Worldcon, which has just begun in Seattle. So, I was looking for something appropriate to review, but

there’s no new Murderbot novel this year. Howsomever, there is a new short story, so here we are with a review of, well, Murderbot shorts. (I keep wanting to refer to this collection as ‘Murderbot’s shorts’, but that would be something different altogether. So I resisted. Barely.)

The first gleam of Murderbot – or at least Murderbot’s universe – is a lot further back than I thought, as well as a lot closer to now than I expected. The earliest story, Obsolescence, doesn’t talk about Murderbot at all. But it does explore a bit of the corporate-controlled universe that Murderbot inhabits. This one is a murder mystery, set in the early days of the Luna and Mars colonies, at a point of transition where the exploration has been completed, the initial colonies have been established, and life is starting to settle into its new normal. It’s a time when the part-human, part-cyber ‘Rovers’, Murderbot’s ancestors, are mostly retired if not deceased, but are still known and celebrated as early heroes. (Also the stars of a serial that Murderbot eventually watches). But the corporate hegemonies already exist, as they do, and are already doing evil in the universe and leaving their cast-off, obsolescent former forced laborers to make their own ways in the galaxy. No matter who it costs.

Escape Rating B: The story is better as an SF mystery than it is anything else, and seen from that perspective it’s a lot of fun, but the knowledge that this is the world that gave birth to Murderbot puts a sting in the tale, as all of Murderbot’s own stories do. (This story is available as an ebook for free as part of the collection Take Us to a Better Place.

The collected review of all four stories was published at Reading Reality

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Gayle Gordon
422 reviews3 followers
August 17, 2025
I love that i found another book from the Murderbot world! It takes place long before the time of the other books and stories, so it's kind of a prequel story. It tells about the early days of humans and AI working together. All that and a murder mystery, too.

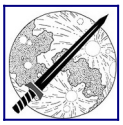
fiction

Ria

107 reviews5 followers
August 17, 2025
4.5*

Listened to the audiobook. I am not sure about her name unfortunately, but I loved the narrator's performance. I can't believe we got a fanfic short story based on a short mention by Murderbot about Rovers and that it didn't like it so switched to a different show. (This book should not be #0.1 for this reason but set after the book that mentions it in my opinion). After hearing so much talk of Rovers being people and even a discussion on the validity of their personhood between a Rover and a human who had been friends with a Rover, no wonder Murderbot really didn't want to continue on with it. It was short and sweet and the hopeful and admiring tone with which the human child was described was such a nice familiarity to the main books and just - as I'll always repeat about this series - nice to read. And yes, the contrast to how corporations are described remains as it should. I will say that this short story has much less, maybe even none?, humour compared to the main books. It's a very short detective fic-type story set in an entertainment channel from the Murderbot universe. I knocked off the .5 star for this reason, but I still really liked it.

Note:
I'm not fond of audiobooks, because I feel like I need to focus harder to not miss anything and prefer looking at the words so I can be 'freer' to pause instantly or reread something from before/refer back. Also visually pleasing words > pleasing audio for me. I feel like it's a shame, honestly, because the oral tradition is such an old and good form of storytelling and I enjoy spoken word (poetry/theatre but also prose or improvised work). So I wanna get used to it, maybe, like I got used to ebooks. I think I'd have to let go of details of wanting to know exactly how a name or new term is written etc. (or just look it up mid-read). This audiobook's narrator was great and I managed to keep enough focus while doing chores. I think I'd still struggle with a longer book, so we'll see.



Danielle
252 reviews4 followers
August 16, 2025
“Obsolescence” by Martha Wells as part of my Murderbot Marathon! Martha Wells could rewrite the phone book and I would read it at this point.

ebooks favorites science-fiction

Melody
2,226 reviews8 followers
August 15, 2025
Short story in a digital book. Serious story - no humor.

fiction-adult

Unmesh Ghosh
12 reviews
August 13, 2025
Mind bending! Still haven't read all the diaries but this was really hits home run on short sci-fi story keeping you glued until end.

91-read-2025

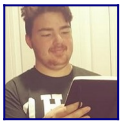
Sabs
589 reviews6 followers
August 10, 2025
4.5

2025 genre-si-fi

Clare O'Beara
Author
25 books371 followers
August 9, 2025
Short story in the Sol system in the early days of space habitats.

There seem to be too many names for length of story, and we're mostly not sure who does what, but otherwise it's easy to follow.
A retired person who accepted augments to make it a space rover for exploration, many years ago, is killed in a space station. The staff and resident children have to worry that some outsider is locked in with them. An outsider who removes parts that would be considered scrap metal by others. To put it mildly, the adults are not taking proper care of the kids.
We can see it's a precursor to the Murderbot stories, set a long time earlier.
This is an unbiased review.

sf



Jake

771 reviews9 followers
August 8, 2025
3.25□'s

I mean its nothing special. A nice little taste in the world. But not necessary to read.

3-25-stars read-in-august

VKNask
118 reviews3 followers
August 8, 2025
From an adding to the overall lore and world building perspective, this story is amazing, but from a comfort level, this was way more grim dark than anything else from this series, and I wasn't prepared for that so it really disturbed me.

Michael Short
35 reviews
August 6, 2025
pre MB

Rachelle Heger
170 reviews
August 5, 2025
One of my least fav entires in the series only because it was a little rushed? I feel like I wanted more build up and bit more from the reveal. I understand how this is a SUPPPPER early prequel but Murderbot and the characters surrounding it are way more fun

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audreyindigo
74 reviews1 follower
August 4, 2025
martha really gets it. loved this, instantly connected with the situation and the characters.

continuing on my murderbot journey.

David
971 reviews6 followers
August 2, 2025

A fun little mystery-thriller set long before the days of SecUnits, both after and before the reign of the corporations.

Sophia
Author
5 books392 followers
July 31, 2025
Long before SecUnits, there were Rovers. Martha Wells contributed this prequel story set in the Murderbot Diaries 'universe' for the Take Us to a Better Place anthology (so far, the only way to read this one).

Jixy is the commander for "Kidland" station and is doing her rounds when two of the kids going through training at the station come screaming to her for help. Next thing she knows, Jixy is in over her head investigating the horrific murder of an old Rover working on the station and the nearest help is twelve hours away. If her co-workers would stop telling horrid old tales about the Piecework Killer right when she needs to go off alone to investigate...

Though this takes place long before Murderbot, I was

thrilled to get a tale that was connected to the series in a brief moment when Murderbot is referencing one of the historical dramas it watches about "Rovers" being the earliest form of Sec Unit constructs.

In summary, this was short, but was a well-developed sci-fi murder mystery.

2025-coyer-out-to-lunch sci-fi-romance

Apple
238 reviews20 followers
July 31, 2025
It's wonderfully written as usual and the characters are alive and interesting, but it's such a tragic story that I can't cope 😭 also I don't think it should be listed on Goodreads as being part of the Murderbot series. It just isn't, even if it may be the same universe.

GONZA
7,288 reviews125 followers
July 27, 2025

This prequel does not feature my favorite Murderbot, but it does provide a historical explanation, eventually.

Questo prequel non prevede la presenza del mio Murderbot preferito, ma fornisce una spiegazione storica, eventualmente.

ebk

Kate McMurry
Author
1 book119 followers
July 23, 2025
Review of the short story “Obsolescence” by Martha Wells (Originally published in the 2020 anthology Take Us to a Better Place, sponsored by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation)

Jixy is the human administrator of a small educational outpost on Kidland Station, near Jupiter. She is horrified when an unprecedented murder occurs. The victim is an “augmented human” named Greggy, and the brutal crime scene indicates deliberate harvesting of his augment components. Jixy places the station on lockdown, desperate to find out whether the killer is

an intruder—or someone she knows and trusts.

I don't typically read murder mysteries unless there is a fascinating framework of either paranormal or science-fiction elements. This story definitely fits the bill. I love Martha Wells's writing, especially the Murderbot Diaries, and though this story isn't directly part of the MB series, it offers a fascinating glimpse into the prehistory of construct-human relations before SecUnits existed.

Despite its short length, this story is a fully realized whodunit with shades of techno-thriller. Wells’s world-building is, as always, brilliantly efficient and immersive. This story also reflects her greatest artistic strength: seamlessly blending action and compellingly supportive relationships between human beings and cyborgs. One of my favorite parts of the MB series, which is strongly present here, is its ethical complexity. The moral questions consistently explored in MB are: What makes a person? Who owns a body with non-human parts? How can powerful corporations, who blatantly engage in slavery, both of humans and cyborgs, be held to account? These questions also point, gradually and (I hope) inevitably, toward the downfall of the corporations that profit from slavery.

As an MB completist and fan of sci-fi mysteries with heart, I found this story deeply satisfying.

PS: As far as I know, this story has not so far been published separately from this anthology.

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caroline 🔖
65 reviews
July 21, 2025
tw: murder, blood, violence, emesis

meh so far my least favorite of any murderbot series stuff. this being a precursor to the precursor of murderbot means inherently it won’t be as interesting (aka no murderbot :/…) but this still fell way below what id anticipated

i loved the premise and the idea, but it came across way more YA than i was anticipating. i wish we found out who that guy was and more about him? instead some dude named greggy is dead, and a little girl lilly wants to change the world.

onto the next diary!!

Tinyel
33 reviews
July 22, 2025
Get the free ebook from the publisher (as a PDF) of “Take Us To A Better Place” in English, and Spanish.

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Wow. So. Wow.

Trigger warning for suicide, ableism, and the most detailed description I've ever seen of a dead body in a Martha Wells story, because a physically disabled man is murdered before the story begins. And it's okay to graphically describe dead physically disabled people, because ableism.

This murdered physically disabled man is then compared to garbage no less than three times, and is infantilized and dehumanized by everyone. Because the author is ableist, not because any character doing the ableism is actually meant to be seen as bad for it, except the villain, who's also physically disabled, so it's literally just demonization, dehumanization, and infantilization of physically disabled people all the way through.

The only other character in the story who gets any kind of description besides the dead man's body is the killer, so that you can imagine how Scarily Physically Disabled They Are. (Sunken eyes and cheeks, no teeth, fully cybernetic chest, all of this used to make them Scary and Unnatural. Because ableism).

The protagonist, is, very notably, able-bodied. We're told this explicitly. Because Martha Wells can't even stand the idea of a physically disabled protagonist in a story where the plot revolves around physically disabled people.

Having Jixy be a cyborg as well wouldn't have removed the ableism with the same exact plot, but it would at least have lightened it, and, in the hands of an actually anti-ableist writer, with a villain who wasn't literally just the demonization of physically disabled people incarnate (Oooh! Watch out! Those Scary Disableds Might Steal Your Body Parts Because They're Jealous!!!!!), this could have been a good, anti-ableist story.

Imagine if the villain were a completely ablebodied neurotypical assasin sent to murder all of the "rovers" (another form of dehumanization! Sarcasm: Great job!) for some sort of pension scam or as a plot of historical revisionism or literally any kind of bigotry

at all? Imagine if Greggy had survived the attempt, more disabled than before, but alive, and the protagonist was also physically disabled? Imagine if this story didn't literally set out with the premise of demonizing physically disabled people and making us out to be scary serial killers who might try to kill you to steal your body parts?

But we didn't get an anti-ableist writer for this story. Martha Wells wrote it and decided first off that she needed to demonize us, so, what we get instead is an extremely ableist story mouthing some anti-ableist morals that the entire rest of The Murderbot Diaries series refutes over and over again and isn't likely to about-face on in the very last book to come out, which is supposed to be in 2026 at some point.

"Dehumanizing and degendering people just because they're cyborgs is wrong!" Alright, Martha Wells, then why do you keep insisting to us that Murderbot and the other cyborgs aren't human simply because they're cyborgs? Why do you keep asking us to agree with the racist and ableist dehumanization spouted by the people enslaving them? Why do you expect us to be okay with you degendering all of them and never once showing us a cyborg or robot character who is anything except fully genderless who uses it/its pronouns?

Rather than sucessfully being anti-ableist, all Martha Wells has accomplished with this story is prove to all of us physically disabled people that she does know that degendering and dehumanizing us is wrong.....but she's gonna keep doing it anyways, with the whole rest of The Murderbot Diaries series. Which is probably why she doesn't make it easier for people to find this story, or actively try to promote it in any way. If more people read it, they'll see the very clear statements she at tried (while actively undermining them) to make in this story, and start questioning the rest of the dehumanization she's just expected us to accept without question.

Oh, and throw in a whole heaping helping of demonizing mentally ill people, too, and paramedics trained in deescalation, a thing she purposefully brings up as existing, and then has her protagonist ignore in favor of escalating the situation to the point that the Scarily Physically Disabled Serial Killer commits suicide by jumping out an airlock. There's a little tease about whether or not they really died, since no one ever found the body, but this is likely to never come up ever again, considering how little Martha Wells advertises this story or makes it easy for people to find.

So, taking a cheap shot at the whole entire concept of harm reduction instead of police brutality as well. Sarcasm:I'm sure that's totally politically neutral. End sarcasm.

Because while we get some ~the protagonist feels like they failed~ it's extremely insincere, and is accomplished by dehumanizing the villain, and it's just very, very, very clear that "talking them down" was never going to be an actual option. The "grossly" physically disabled people like Greggy and the killer have to die, and the able-bodied hero has to get off scott free, even though she genuinely needs to be arrested for criminal levels of incomeptance and child endangerment.

This space station is supposedly some kind of babysitting thing or summer camp, where people send their kids, several of whom are repeatedly mentioned, especially a kid named Lilly.

How old is Lilly or any of the other mentioned children? We don't know. Martha Wells doesn't tell us, and the portrayal of these child characters is so inconsistant it's absolutely baffling. When they first appear, they seem to be very young, like elementary schoolers. But then in later scenes they, especially Lilly, start talking and doing things, and now it seems

like they're maybe middle schoolers, and at one point Lilly seems like she could literally be an older teenager. But then that's followed up by her being described as having a "little face" implying a *very* young child once again, and then she's "handed over" to someone imply she's actually literally being held, again implying a very young child.

It's so inconsistant and baffling, and does not help at all the fact that every adult on this space station is criminally incometant and needs to be fired and tried for child endangerment, but that's not even The Point™, we seem to be meant to think the protagonist, who is the worst of them all, is somehow doing the right thing by endangering everyone on the station for Literally No Reason, including all the children, and then purposefully endangers Lilly for no reason, multiple times.

The adults on this space station should never be entrusted with the safety of children. First of all, at least two what appear to be very small children were somehow allowed to wander through the space station by themselves, getting as far as the maintenance bay before anyone caught them. And the only reason anyone seemingly knows they were in there is that that's where they found the murdered man and started screaming, the noise of which

attracted attention.

How did these two get away from the supervision of their Space Camp Counselor (we never get told what any of these people's titles are, besides Jixy being revealed to be the Commander of the station so far into the story it seems like Martha Wells didn't even think of it until that moment, and then didn't edit it in retroactively) assigned to them? Why wasn't an emergency called as soon as anyone noticed them missing? It seems like no one even noticed they were missing!

Then, after the emergency has been declared, everyone, including the kids, is told to go to one of two pre-designated rooms until the emergency is over, as a safety zone. Like a combination school lockdown and fire drill.

You would assume this means that X number of kids is assigned to Y number of adults, and everyone has their designated spots, right? Because keeping track of children in an emergency should be priority number 1 on every adults mind, especially when you're in space, right? You'd think so, wouldn't you?

But Lilly, a child whose age could range anywhere from 5 to 16 and back again, not only is allowed to

wander freely in this designated zone, including leaving the room everyone is supposed to stay in to wander out into the hallway where the leadership are talking, she then later escapes during the lockdown without a single person noticing they lost a child while there's a serial killer aboard the station!

She jumps in the elevator with the protagonist, Commander Jixy, and Martha Wells makes sure to tell us that Jixy could have simply pressed the emergency stop and return button to escort this child back to the safety zone. And then Jixy refuses to do that, because she, for no good reason at all, has decided She Needs To Know how long the serial killer has been aboard. So she's breaking every safety protocol in the book, and is now actively letting this child join her in doing so, even though it would have taken 5 seconds or less to get her back to safety.

And did I mention not one single adult noticed she'd left the room? During a This Is Not A Drill lockdown? And the point here is NOT that these people are overworked and understaffed and can't handle these sorts of situations. It's just presented as though these fully grown adults couldn't have done anything to stop this child, who might be 6 years old, from leaving the room during lockdown when one person has already been murdered.

This could have been a fine story in the "child endangerment" side of things if the point WAS that these adults are criminally incompetent and should never have been trusted with the safety of these children, if it was, say, from Lilly's perspective instead of Jixy's, as Jixy's criminally negligent and incompetant actions put Lilly and her friends in danger, forcing the children to have to be the ones to save the day.

Instead, it's all just treated as completely hunky-dory. Totally fine to have a child that might be 6 years old standing to guard the elevator while you have a serial killer running loose! Totally fine to knowingly and purposefully drag a small child into what you think is the lair of a serial killer! Totally fine for every single adult on this station, whose job is literally to look after children, be so incometant that they don't even notice a child leaving the room during emergency lockdown!

And then at the end of the story we get a casual little reveal that one of these same adults has smuggled alcohol aboard and they all know about it, leading to the probably entirely-unintended on the author's part question that is now begging to be asked: Were these people literally drunk during this emergency? Is that

why they didn't notice they'd lost a whole entire child???? Is that why the kids got away from their supervision and made it all the way to the maintenance bay without anyone noticing they were gone in the first place???? These are the questions that beg to be ask when we've seen nothing but criminal incompetence from every single adult in this story to this point, and then get the reveal that they're all drinking smuggled in alcohol!

In the meta sense, this story is just filled to the brim with ableism. And in-universe it's not any better. The only happy ending I can imagine for this story is a follow up investigation where every single one of these adults is stripped of their teaching licensees and blacklisted from child care positions in the future, if not flat out thrown in Dystopian Space Jail for criminal child endangerment, especially the protagonist, who broke every safety protocol in the book, and for no damn reason, either!

Like with other Martha Wells stories, there are too many named characters who are completely meaningless to the story, have no description, and may as well just not exist at all. The protagonist is completely unlikable, but it's not even on purpose. She's not an anti-hero. We're supposed to like her.

On the technical side, there are so many of the same basic, endlessly repeating mistakes Martha Wells seems to keep making in all her writing. Clunky, unnecessarily confusing paragraph and sentence structure, not seeming to grasp how pronouns work,

On the social side, like I said. Ableism. Ableism out the wazoo. It could be saying something meaningful, if this weren't set in the exact same Murderbot Diaries universe where every other book in the series asks us to agree simultaneously with Martha Wells *and* the literal villain of this story, that dehumanizing and degendering physically disabled people (in order to justify enslaving us) is a good thing. Because look! It's got extensive prosthetics! Clearly this proves Murderbot and the other cyborgs cannot possibly be human, right? Literal Space Nazi propaganda and we're supposed to agree it's totally true, unquestionably.

Also, like Rapport: Friendship, Solidarity, Communion, Empathy, there's no proper climax, falling action, or resolution. It just kind of stops extremely abrutply, with the villain deciding to kill themselves for literally no reason. And then one and a half pages later it's over. And the only theme to truly be found is "watch out for those scary physically disabled people, they might be serial killers who'll

steal your body parts!" Are you serious.

1/5 stars. I'd give it zero if I could. This just proves that she knows dehumanizing and degendering physically disabled people is wrong, but she's just gonna keep doing it anyways, because she doesn't actually care about us, just like she doesn't actually care about people of color, or else she wouldn't be gleefully profiting off of Apple whitewashing her own main character and telling people to give Apple more money as a reward.

ableism martha-wells science-fiction

Howard Ying
9 reviews45 followers
July 20, 2025
A welcomed short thriller to the sci-fi series.

Krish Sadarangani
53 reviews
July 9, 2025
Just a waste of time. Provided nothing of substance

Kelly Marie
5 reviews1 follower
July 2, 2025
This is a great little story, EXCEPT, one of the main characters is only referred to using "they" pronouns and it honestly slowed down my reading and broke my immersion. I had to keep reminding myself that the other characters were referring to only one person and not several, which really made the end very difficult to read and keep track of.

Yuval Epel
15 reviews
June 27, 2025
Rating: 3 – An okay short story

Set before the Murderbot Diaries, Obsolescence is a sci-fi mystery that explores a time when augmented human technology was still in its early stages. The protagonist is a teacher living on a space station, entirely unaugmented. When a disturbing incident occurs, she finds herself drawn into the mystery. The story is competently written, with clear scenes and likeable characters. I enjoyed the setting and tone. However, I found it hard to rate it higher — the

plot felt a bit thin, and the story didn’t leave a strong impression. It’s pleasant enough, but a bit forgettable.

Callie Morken
65 reviews
June 13, 2025
Turns out I love stories revolving human/robot relationships! This is a short story adjacent to the Murderbot series and while reading it, I was thinking about the series through Murderbots eyes (kind of like ART) - which made the empathy the humans shared towards the bots/augmented humans that much more endearing. This perspective put a really cute spin on the short story!

Not as captivating as the murderbot Diaries, but still a really good read! If you’ve read the Murderbot books, this is definitely worth the read!

Darryl Bailey
244 reviews4 followers

May 17, 2025
Good little prequel

DarkHeraldMage
276 reviews54 followers
May 9, 2025
I read this after the first four books/novellas in the series and didn't connect with it quite as much, but still felt it was a solid addition to the world. Set long before the other stories, it gave a good look at early treatment of augmented humans with a very clear message built into the narrative. I'm hoping something from this ties in more directly at some point in the series, but even if it doesn't it was a quick little detour on my journey to read everything Murderbot related.

Amanda Sola
432 reviews19 followers
April 30, 2025
Another short, but informational installment in the murderbot saga. In this, we go back to the early days

of augmentation and we get to see how severely augmented humans had essentially been made prior to the mostly inorganic units of "current" times. We also get to see how corporations have basically always sucked and how that impacted augmented individuals. Solid read - this can basically be read any time, but I would recommend after Exit Strategy only because the early days are first brought up in that one.

essays-and-short-stories sci-fi

Elena
1,031 reviews79 followers
April 26, 2025
It's an introdcution to the ***Murderbot Diaries*** universe.

Just showing us a bit of the augmented humans and their world.

It isn't necessary to read it before the **Murderbot** stories but it surely was well-written and intriguing. I've enjoyed it :)

audiobooks crime-stories disabilities-illnesses-scars

ThDogs
152 reviews2 followers
April 24, 2025
I didn't enjoy this one as much, even for the worldbuilding. I did like the illustrated art demonstrating early....augments or constructs?

science-fiction

Jane

2,416 reviews66 followers

April 8, 2025

Earliest prequel to the Murderbot Diaries? Eh, don't know about that.

But once I saw that I had to track down the story and read it. It was a good short story. I wanted to know what happened. Wells covers a lot of ground in only a few pages. I'm glad I read it. I don't consider it necessary reading for Murderbot fans.

artificial-intelligence fiction sci-fi short-stories space